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C O N F I D E N T I A L DUSHANBE 001729

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: SWIMMING AROUND IN AUTHORITARIAN MOLASSES

REF: A) DUSHANBE 0670 B) DUSHANBE 1702

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard E. Hoagland, Ambassador, EXEC, Embassy

Dushanbe.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Trying to do the U.S. Government's business in Tajikistan has never been easy, in part because of under-staffing and low capacity at many of the ministries. Further, the authoritarian desire to micromanage, as well as the inclination to buck even minor decisions up to a minister or to the President himself for fear of making the "wrong decision," slows things down, sometimes to the point of paralysis. Since the "color revolutions" and subsequent pressure from Moscow to control the Western presence in Tajikistan, these tendencies have grown stronger and more aggravating. Embassy Dushanbe has relatively easy access in areas that the Tajik Government sees as beneficial to its interests - especially the Tajik Border Guards, the Drug Control Agency, and some parts of the defense establishment like the National Guard and even the Interior Ministry. But anything that smacks of "political" can be dragged out nearly ad infinitum. The result is sometimes lost programs and lost opportunities. In the end, this paranoia and rigidity could be self-defeating for the current Government of Tajikistan. It may think it is maintaining political stability, but it's the false stability Moscow trumpets as the be-all and end-all for Central Asia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Tajikistan has long required that meetings with ministers be requested via Diplomatic Note to the Foreign Ministry. In an efficient, smoothly running government, this would be merely an irritant. However, too frequently initial diplomatic notes require several follow-up phone calls to the ministry in question, then a follow-up call to the MFA, and then a second diplomatic note weeks later to remind about the first request.

¶3. (C) We know that most MFA offices include Ministry of Security (MB) personnel, and the Protocol Office is no exception. We can almost imagine the MB clerk in Protocol sorting dip-note requests for meetings into three stacks: "probably OK," "maybe later," and "when hell freezes over."

¶4. (C) The April 14 MFA directive that embassies and NGOs inform the MFA by diplomatic note - in advance - of any activity planned (reftel), was never fully implemented. And, in fact, Western Embassies and a number of NGOs, under U.S. leadership, agreed to ignore it. Nevertheless, this directive may have had a chilling effect, because lower-level bureaucrats, especially outside of Dushanbe, sometimes resist giving permission for programs and projects without an explicit go-ahead from the central government. As a result, it sometimes seems increasingly difficult for NGOs, international organizations, and embassies to carry out their missions in Tajikistan.

THE UNITED STATES NOT THE ONLY TARGET

¶5. (C) Organizations such as the UN and International Committee of the Red Cross have observed a slowing down or stopping of their usual activities while they wait for government "facilitation." Independent training programs and conferences have been delayed without the proper "permissions." The UN Tajikistan Office for Peace Building reports that without a month's advance notice, visiting delegations cannot get courtesy calls on partner ministries.

¶6. (C) In the last two months, Post has frequently faced a dead end trying to arrange things as simple as a courtesy call on a secondary ministry, let alone a demarche on Avian flu or a

high-level visit. On truly pressing issues, such as Secretary Rice's October 13 visit, Post's last resort and only point of contact was to call on First Deputy Foreign Minister Aslov, and ask him to deal with low-level issues such as motorcade placement and parking-gate access. Something is wrong when the number two in a Foreign Ministry does the work of a desk officer, even if he is gracious and a good problem-solver.

BOULDER'S INTERNET AND INFORMATION CENTER AT RISK

¶7. (C) The City of Dushanbe risks losing a \$5 million internet center from its sister city Boulder because the Mayor's office

will not make a decision on a contractor, and avoids meetings with embassy staff. Mayor Obaidulloev and his office are notoriously difficult, and he has made clear that he is not much interested in this project - even though Boulder has given him the right to choose the local contractor, which undoubtedly would mean money in his own pocket from the kick-back. In fact, he bumped the project site from a prominent downtown location to the far suburbs because he "didn't like the architecture." We surmise that the mayor and his Moscow cronies simply do not want an American "information center" - i.e., a "nest of spies" - in Dushanbe.

PERVASIVE CORRUPTION MAY SOMETIMES PLAY A ROLE

¶18. (C) Even programs and projects distinctly in Tajikistan's interests can get held up unconscionably long. The Ministry of Energy ignored repeated e-mails and instructions from the U.S. Trade and Development Agency to help coordinate a hydropower feasibility study, and risked losing this important opportunity that they themselves had requested. We surmise that this may have been ineptitude or, possibly, irritation at having to do business by international standards instead of cutting deals and filling pockets behind closed doors. (COMMENT: The simple role of all-pervasive corruption cannot be over-estimated. END COMMENT.)

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION TURNS RECALCITRANT

¶19. (C) The paralysis stems in part from the fact that few Tajik officials, even deputy ministers, want to take responsibility for making a decision for fear of making the "wrong" decision. ABA/CEELI has been trying to implement a Human Rights course in law schools, but no law faculty will entertain the idea until written permission comes from the Ministry of Education. The Deputy Education Minister Irina Karimova refused to discuss the project, and demurred until the Minister could decide. When the DCM was able to get a meeting, the Minister declared that ABA/CEELI's previous Memorandum of Understanding was invalid, because his predecessor had signed it. He required ABA/CEELI to resubmit its proposal for the Ministry to re-evaluate before any instruction would be given to the law faculties. Meanwhile the same Deputy Minister Karimova cancelled another successful ABA/CEELI project and refuses to discuss the matter with the NGO or the Embassy.

¶10. (C) Part of this problem is that ministers, in general, only want to meet with Ambassadors. This creates a vicious and inefficient cycle, because in "normal" countries, all embassy officers conduct the daily work of the Mission with their host-country counterparts. By imposing their own standards that "only the top has authority," the Tajiks mire themselves ever deeper into inaction.

¶11. (C) More darkly, we speculate that ABA/CEELI's problems stem from the Tajik Government's Kremlin-influenced instructions to prevent a "color revolution" in Tajikistan. It should not be forgotten that following the April 14 directive to pre-inform about foreign activities, MB instructed all universities and E

public associations that they were required to report all approaches by "foreigners" and to turn in the names of all Tajiks - students, faculty, and association members - who have contacts with foreigners.

OSCE WHISTLES IN THE DARK

¶12. (C) Some observers see nefarious forces at work, reflecting the influence of a few MB-influenced and self-interested insiders in the Presidential apparatus determined to strictly control diplomatic and civil-society activities. However, a few optimistic Western diplomats see the current paralysis simply as a young government's growing pains. Ricard Lepri, Deputy Director of OSCE, posited that the current go-slow in the MFA represents Tajikistan's attempts to have better oversight over all international activities, not an intent to block activities. We judge this as an overly charitable view. (COMMENT: We would note that the current OSCE Tajikistan leadership adamantly rejects any step or public statement that might give offense to the Government of Tajikistan. END COMMENT.)

¶13. (C) COMMENT: In response to the difficulties of working in Tajikistan, many shrug and say, "It's just the way they are." But the current practice of bucking every decision to the top does not give evidence of a government comfortable with democratic practices and responsive to its citizens. It creates paralysis for Western interests. Coupled with the increased regulation and scrutiny of Western NGOs, the current situation suggests a paranoid rigidity that could become self-defeating, even though it creates the false stability that Moscow trumpets as the be-all and end-all for Central Asia. END COMMENT.

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